

**SIERRA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT
ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE PERIOD OF JULY 1, 2010 TO JUNE 30, 2011**



Out Hillsboro way

The Board of Supervisors of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District continues to grow and expand their District programs and is excited that the community is recognizing the District as the leader in addressing the natural resource needs within the boundaries of the Sierra District.

The regular board meetings of the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District are held on the first Thursday of each month at the Chandler Elkins Conference Room, Sierra Conservation Plaza, 2101 S Broadway in Truth or Consequences at 3:00 p.m. Current District Supervisors are:

Willard Hall, Chairman, Palomas Community
John Able, Vice-Chairman, Animas Community
Randy Coil, Secretary-Treasurer, Monticello Community
Tami Garrett, Winston Community
Ken James, Member, T. or C. Community
Ronnie Woolf, Member, Engle Community
Crystal Diamond, Winston/Chloride Community

Personnel providing assistance to the Sierra District are:

Merry Jo Fahl, *District Manager, full-time*
Cody Cummings, *Resource Management Specialist, full-time*
Bonnie Freeman, *District Clerk, part-time*
Terry Miller, *Wildland Urban Interface Planner, part-time*
Bill Sallee, *Noxious Weed technician, part-time*

Additional technical assistance is provided to the Sierra District by staff of the USDA- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Truth or Consequences Field Office, which includes Mike Shivers, District Conservationist, Soil Conservationist Mauro Herrera and. DaRonda Fox, the Soil Conservation Technician.

Ranchers in the Sierra District saw an increase in cattle prices this past year. Spring prices averaged \$1.22 a pound for 400-500# steers and \$1.15 a pound for 400-500# heifers. During the fall, sales averaged \$1.18 to \$1.20 a pound for both steers and heifers. Hay prices went up this year with small bales of alfalfa bringing an average of \$7.00 to \$8.00 a bale or around \$165 a ton.

The District saw below average precipitation this winter, with the two USDA- NRCS *SNOTEL* sites located in the district registering snow fall totals of 15-25% of average. The Lookout Mountain site recorded precipitation levels from July 2010 to September 2010 at 13.4 inches and then from October 2010 to June of 2011 at 2.9 inches. The *SNOTEL* site at McKnight showed a significant reduction in moisture levels this year with precipitation totals for July 2010 to September 2010 at 15.2 inches and from October 2010 to June, 2011 at 1.7 inches. These totals reflect all measurable moisture-both snow and rain. Last year's outstanding monsoon season led to great forage production this year for both livestock and wildlife. However, with no spring moisture to speak of, those forage levels were all wildlife and

livestock had to carry them through, except for supplemental feeding by agriculture producers. The forage levels also created tremendous fuel loads for wildfires, with the springs and summer of 2011 being one of the worst fire conditions in a number of years. With very little snow runoff, lake levels were down dramatically this year, with Elephant Butte Lake levels in June of 2011 down to 269,726 acre feet, compared to July 2010 levels of 516,093 acre feet, and records showing in-flows into the lake of an approximately 20% of average.

PROGRAMS

Rangeland and Cropland Cost-Share Program

There were a total of fifteen applicants for the FY11 District Cost-Share program, with projects totaling \$143,567.00. The District's share would have equaled \$51,655.00 if they had been able to fund 50% of all the conservation practices. The seven approved applicants in the program completed their projects and a total of \$24,407 was distributed to the producers in the program. The total amount of acres benefited was 37 acres of farmland and 7,940 acres of range land. One Solar Pumping plant was installed to help better distribute grazing there by benefiting 1,940 acres of rangeland. 527 feet of irrigation pipeline was installed improving efficiency in irrigation and benefiting 5 acres of farmland. 12 acres of farmland was laser leveled to improve irrigation efficiency. 800 feet of concrete ditch was installed to improve irrigation efficiency benefitting 15 acres. 7,700 feet of livestock pipeline was installed benefitting over 6,000 acres for better grazing distribution.



Livestock water pipeline and drinking trough

Accomplishments installed through the NRCS-Environmental Quality Incentives Program include:

- 34,086 feet of livestock fencing installed, improving grazing management of rangelands.
- 26,038 feet of livestock water pipeline and 10 watering facilities, 2 pumping plants and 1 well improving grazing management of rangelands.
- 6,076 acres of brush management improving the ecological site similarity index and improving rangeland health.
- 4,127 feet of irrigation pipeline improving irrigation efficiencies on irrigated hay land
- 15.4 acres of land leveling improving irrigation efficiency on irrigated hay land
- 1 diversion to divert surface runoff protecting livestock practices
- 812 feet of field ditch improving irrigation efficiencies on irrigated crop land
- 960 square feet of High Tunnel System (Hoop House) extending the growing season on crop land.

Windbreak Drip Irrigation Cost-Share Program

The Sierra SWCD continues their cost-share program to encourage home owners to install a drip irrigation system on existing or newly installed windbreaks. The SWCD provides up to \$100 for such things as pressure reducers, timers, filtration system, or a backflow preventer and \$3.40 per emitter and budgets \$1000 towards this program annually. This program continues to be utilized by members of the community.

Grade Stabilization cost-share program

Working collaboratively with the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (Very Large Array) near Magdalena, NM, the Sierra SWCD implemented a cost-share program to encourage grade stabilization. The District is able to utilize excess railroad ties from the VLA and offer those to landowners, if they can show a need for stabilization work and have a need for more than 50 railroad ties. Since the program began several years ago, more than 3,000 ties have been utilized. The Sierra SWCD has also provided materials to community groups, municipalities and entities.



Grade stabilization on commercial site

Tree and Shrub Seedling Program

This program encourages homeowners to plant tree and shrub seedlings for erosion control or for windbreaks. The District works with the NM State Forestry Seedling program for the majority of the plants offered, specifically plants that are acclimated to the local elevation. In addition the District established a program with a local nursery to offer more drought tolerant shrubs and a number of plants for groundcover. Over 800 trees and shrubs were sold and planted within the community.



Spanish Broom

Each year the District provides a large number of trees, shrubs and ground cover to local groups. This year Sierra SWCD donated to the following projects or organizations:

Desert Haven Animal Shelter
Main Street Project
Bountiful Alliance
City of Truth or Consequences Community Garden
Caballo Soil and Water Conservation District

Conservation Education

One of the major objectives of the Sierra SWCD is conservation education. They conduct or participate in many activities that promote education in natural resources. For the past 15 years the Sierra District has assisted the local high school (Hot Springs High) FFA chapter with education events and has also sponsored any qualifying land resource teams to the National Finals in Oklahoma City. For numerous years the Sierra District has provided funding for a part-time natural resource coach to assist the high school vocational-agriculture teacher in training students in preparation for these judging contests. This year the Hot Springs High School FFA Homesite Judging Team qualified to attend the National Judging Competition in Oklahoma.

The District worked closely with the Sierra County Cooperative Extension Office in sponsoring the annual Ag Day at the Smith ranch in Cuchillo. Ag Day was presented to all 2nd and 5th grade students in the local school system and had 20 learning stations, showcasing a variety of Ag related resources and products.

The Sierra SWCD actively promoted National Soil Stewardship Week by providing news articles and public service announcements to the local radio station. During Earth Day more than 240 Afghan Pines was distributed to all 1st and 4th grade students and educational curriculum was provided to all 3rd and 6th grade students in the local school system. Sierra SWCD, working with the Hot Springs High School biology teacher, sponsored a team of five students and two alternates to the New Mexico Cannon Envirothon.

Community Awareness

With a mil levy in place, the Sierra SWCD is very cognizant of their accountability to the community and works very hard promoting natural resource awareness. The District developed a display booth at the local county fair and calendars were provided to all the cooperators of the Sierra District.

The Sierra District hosted their Annual awards dinner this year, recognizing Russell Freeman, a rancher near the Winston community, as the Outstanding Land Stewardship for 2010 in

recognition of his efforts to improve rangeland conditions through the implementation of brush control on invasive pinyon and juniper trees. Alfred Ramos, with the NRCS, received recognition as the Outstanding Land Conservationist winner. Alfred is the NRCS Area South Agronomist and provided countless hours of assistance to the producers within the Sierra SWCD as well as providing assistance to other SWCDs in the Southwest Area. The District presented their own special award of “Perseverance” Ron White of Monticello. Ron volunteered to help the Board of Supervisors of the Sierra SWCD in addressing their concerns with wildlife issues. Ron has traveled to meetings around the southwest that dealt with jaguars, Mexican Gray Wolf and other wildlife and brought pertinent information back to the Board for their action.



Russell Freeman (I) receiving the Land Stewardship award

Copies of the Annual Report and Annual Plan of Work were distributed to conservation partners and local legislators. The Sierra SWCD also has their own web site (www.sierrasoil.org) to help keep folks up to date on District projects.

District staff has made presentations to organizations and entities regarding the Sierra SWCD programs and soil and water conservation districts in general. Those include the City of Truth or Consequences, the County of Sierra, the Truth or Consequences Municipal School District, the City of Elephant Butte, the Village of Williamsburg, the Sierra County Garden Club, and the Sierra County Farm and Livestock Bureau.

Fiscal Administration

The Board takes their fiscal responsibility very seriously and works diligently to ensure that financial procedures are followed closely. Budgets and financial reports are submitted on a timely basis to the Department of Finance & Administration. The existing mil levy rate authorization is submitted to the New Mexico Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the local County Treasurers for review and compliance. Supervisors wanted to ensure that financial policies are consistent and developed a Sierra SWCD policy handbook. Professional Services Contracts were completed for necessary technical and fiscal assistance.

District Act Compliance

The District follows the Open Meetings Act and completes an Open Meetings Resolution annually. The District received and commented on terrain management plans for proposed subdivisions within the District. The Sierra SWCD participates in any pertinent County Planning and Zoning meetings. District Supervisors and staff attended trainings provided at the NMACD annual conference as well as other professional development classes. The Sierra District has a standing committee designated as their representative to the Farm Bill local work group and worked diligently on developing the guidelines for EQIP implementation with the T or C Field Office of the NRCS. Members and/or staff attended their local Region III New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD) meeting that was held in March in Deming and also the NMACD summer conference in Ruidoso during the month of July 2010. Supervisors and staff attended the annual conference of the New Mexico Association of Conservation District, which was held in Bernalillo, New Mexico in October of 2010.

Current Issues

The Sierra SWCD, during regular meetings, annually reviews their Memorandums of Understanding with the USDI- Bureau of Land Management, Las Cruces Field Office, the T or C Field Office of the NRCS and with the USDA-Forest Service, Gila National Forest.

Official comments were provided to the USFS regarding their new Planning Rule, comments to the US Fish & Wildlife Service listing of critical habitat for the Chiricahua Leopard Frog and funding for recovery plans for plants and animals under the Endangered Species Act.

Working with the County of Sierra, the Sierra SWCD submitted the name of their district manager to serve on the Southwest Resource Advisory Council for the US Forest Service and she was selected by the Secretary of Agriculture. This group is responsible for allocation of funding for projects that benefit US Forest Service land within a six county area

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Sierra County Community Wildfire Protection

The Sierra SWCD is serving as the lead agency in Sierra County in the development and implementation of prevention and mitigation efforts for Wildland-Urban Interface fires. The Sierra County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) was officially adopted by the County of Sierra, the NM State Forestry and Sierra County Volunteer Firefighters in July of 2005. Copies of the document were sent to the Gila National Forest Supervisor's office in Silver City and the Las Cruces Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, who then forwarded copies to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior.



Gila National Forest, Black Range District, Fire-Use Wildfire

Meetings are held with representatives from the County of Sierra, the Bureau of Land Management, NM State Forestry, NM Department of Transportation, Bureau of Reclamation, local electric cooperatives, local propane dealers, Forest Service and members of the local volunteer fire departments. The group identified communication needs, highway right-of-ways, training needs and project areas. One objective is to secure funding that would assist in implementing thinning projects on private and public lands so that property and lives would be more defensible against wildfires.

The Sierra SWCD implemented and completed NM State Forestry Hazard Mitigation grants totaling more than \$345,000 that provided financial cost-share assistance to those landowners who participated. The Sierra SWCD has a part-time Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) planner on staff that completes an assessment and writes treatment plans for the landowners. Upon

completion of the work, the landowner will be reimbursed for 70% of the cost of implementing the treatment plan.

The Sierra SWCD has applied for and received funding of more than \$379,000 through the New Mexico Association of Counties (NMAC) Hazardous Fuels Reduction program. Projects have included funding to complete the Sierra County Community Wildfire Protection Plan but the majority of the funding has been utilized to complete fuels reduction projects. This year the Sierra SWCD received funding to update the Sierra County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. This activity would include updating accomplishments in reducing hazardous wildland-urban interface areas, updated on communication issues, information and outreach efforts and updates of training and equipment needs of the local volunteer fire departments.

Sierra County Cooperative Weed Management Area

The Sierra District serves as the lead agency on the implementation of the Sierra County Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA). This designation will open the door for more funding opportunities and allow a broader scope of work. More importantly, a CWMA provides for a more active partnership by detailing responsibilities and action items. The agreements have been signed and we are officially organized into a CWMA. This is resulting in a great partnership with signatories from several local, state and federal agencies. We have been working together with such agencies as the Department of Transportation in controlling noxious infestations that start along roadways and encroach on public as well as private lands. Our partnerships also gain funding for such projects as habitat restoration with the Fish and Wildlife Service projects. It will help to open the door with such agencies as the US Forest Service to begin the process of NEPA to allow limited herbicide use near designated areas such as camp grounds where non-native plant species have been introduced. These enhanced relationships are proving to be very beneficial to all parties involved as well as peripheral entities.

The District continues to inventory, map and treat identified noxious plants in Sierra County. Initially funded by the Bureau of Land Management, the BLM continues to provide needed herbicides and equipment to the Sierra SWCD. The SWCD actively works to improve the working relationships with other groups and agencies involved in noxious weed control within the District. Current plants on the inventory include: Camelthorn, African Rhue, Russian Knapweed, Bull Thistle, Salt Cedar, and Malta Starthistle. The local program encourages landowners to voluntarily control any noxious plants identified on their property by signing an agreement with the District. The necessary herbicide and application equipment is provided for them to apply the appropriate amount of herbicide to the plant to assist in the control. This process has been very successful. The Sierra District has worked very hard with the community, providing technical and on-site assistance. Outreach efforts included on-site treatment at the Hot Springs Cemetery, the cemetery at the community of Monticello, treatment at the Sierra County Fairgrounds, and the Veteran's Memorial Park.

In the ongoing battle against invasive species, treatment has been applied to over 1000 acres of weeds, exclusive of salt cedar projects. In the private sector, we have been working hard to assist in the control of several invasive species such as African Rue in the lowland areas and Bull Thistle in some of the mountainous grazing areas.



Bull Thistle

Working cooperatively with the Gila National Forest, Black Range Ranger District, the Sierra SWCD received funding from the US Forest Service Southwest Resource Advisory Council, Title II Secure Rural School program . The purpose of the grant was to inventory and to complete treatment on approximately 300 acres of Bull Thistle located on private and USFS land near the historic Wall lake. Sierra SWCD staff provided equipment, the USFS provided staff to complete the inventory and the grant paid for Sierra SWCD staff time and supplies to complete the treatment.

HEALING WATERS TRAIL

During the development of the Rio Grande Corridor Enhancement and Economic Development Plan, a number of projects were adopted and several of them were very similar. Early in 2007, the Jornada Resource Conservation & Development Council, Inc. (RC&D) conducted an information gathering meeting with various organizations and entities regarding those ideas and the result was the concept of the Healing Waters Trail. The trail would highlight those ideas, which included a focus on the mineral baths, fishing and access for handicap fishing, birding and walking. A community based planning effort began in the summer of 2007 when the City of Truth or Consequences and the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District submitted a request to the National Park Service for technical assistance in trail planning

through the Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program to help the community focus on the Healing Waters Trail. RTCA is a federal technical assistance program that provides support for community-based trails and conservation based projects throughout the country. Staff provided would facilitate the development of the trail and focus on community involvement in the planning process.



After the initial meeting in January of 2008, a steering committee was organized to represent the three different segments of the trail: the historic hot springs district, the wetlands, and Carrie Tingley Hill. Membership in the steering committee is very diverse, representing all walks of life: fishermen, hot springs owners, veterans, governmental entities, civic organizations, youth organizations, Main Street Truth or Consequences and the Sierra Club.

The Healing Waters Trail Development Plan represents the collective effort of local citizens, local businesses and organizations and the City of Truth or Consequences to create a three (3) mile walking trail in the City. When fully implemented, the trail will connect the Historic Hot Springs District to the Rotary Park and wetlands along the Rio Grande and then travel around or over Carrie Tingley Hill, connecting with Veterans Memorial Park and finally looping back to Geronimo Springs Museum along South Broadway and Main Street. This Plan establishes the framework necessary to implement the Trail. It outlines potential partnerships that can contribute to the development and maintenance of the Trail, promoting the associated benefits of this trail including quality of life and economic benefits and provides strategies for implementing the Trail.

Several community-wide workshops and meetings have been held to gather input, discuss issues with wildlife and to incorporate the designated historic bathhouse district. Workshops were held to talk about sidewalks and the ease of “walking” the trail. A social and education event was held in the winter-Breakfast with the Birds- to highlight the possible birding activities and a workshop was held, with presentations made by staff of the Bosque del Apache, to determine some of the best methods of renovation of the natural wetland that is part of the trail.

The City of Truth or Consequences, with assistance of the Sierra SWCD, applied for a Recreational Trails Program grant through NM State Parks that would provide funding for signage along the trail, benches, shade structures, trash bins and interpretive panels. The grant was awarded in the amount of \$93,844 and work has begun to complete all the necessary paperwork so that during FY11 actual on-the-ground projects can be implemented.



Looking west from the top of the Healing Waters Trail loop

THE SIERRA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF SUPERVISORS IS VERY PROUD OF THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE PAST FISCAL YEAR AND HOPES TO CONTINUE MOVING FORWARD.